

# But seriously now ... political themes in Aristophanes' *Wasps*

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Despite Aristophanes' claim in the prologue to the *Wasps* that he is presenting 'just a little fable, with a moral', it is possible to read this master poet's purpose in more than one way. Certainly, all comedies must be funny to be successful, and perhaps the *Wasps* (presented in 422 B.C.) tries harder than most: Aristophanes' offering for the previous year, the *Clouds*, had flopped, apparently because the crowd failed to understand it. As the poet claims in the parabasis to the *Wasps*, 'they failed to see the point, and all was wasted'; the *Wasps* was, then, to be a more accessible play. But despite the emphasis upon entertainment, the dramatic festivals at Athens – the Great Dionysia and the Lenaia (where the *Wasps* was performed) – had a serious role to play in the city, and it is that role that I explore here.

As a comic poet, Aristophanes saw himself as having a duty both to entertain and to educate the people. He used his plays to level criticisms against what he saw as the complacency of Athenian democracy in his day. Comedy was used as a sort of 'safety-valve,' releasing the pressures bubbling up inside society. Aristophanes was able to take issue with the unscrupulous demagogues (in particular Cleon) who manipulated the people for their own profit rather than the common good. As well as the usual targets, the *Wasps* attacks a more precise feature of the contemporary world: it satirises an old man's addiction to the lawcourts, and his young son's attempts to wean him away from this mania. Aristophanes was able to address, albeit in a humorous way, the serious issue of corrupt leaders who indulged their tastes for luxury while the misguided jurymen had to survive on subsistence pay, a pittance of three obols per day.

The plot of the *Wasps* follows Bdelycleon's attempts to cure the passion of his father, Philocleon, for the lawcourts. Aristophanes' purpose, analogously, is 'to cure the city of an inveterate and deep-seated malady.' He does not attack the lawcourts themselves (there is little indication that he sees anything wrong with their procedures). Nor is it Athenian democracy that he criticises. Rather, the object of his attack is the way in which the politicians, exemplified by Cleon, abuse the people. The serious purpose underlying the *Wasps* is the aim to cure the people's ignorance by bringing it, through comedy, into the public eye. Another important theme is power. Although in his introductory speech, Xanthias says 'We don't intend to make mince-meat of Cleon this time' – as Aristophanes had done in the *Knights* – Aristophanes subtly keeps Cleon as a central figure in the play, by identifying his main characters as Bdelycleon ('Cleon-hater') and Philocleon ('Cleon-lover'). These names are accurate, at least in the first instance: Philocleon is a die-hard supporter of Cleon and keen to discharge his democratic duties by serving on the jury, whereas Bdelycleon seems to oppose democracy, because he refuses to allow his father out of the house to serve the people. Bdelycleon realises that Cleon is corrupt; Philocleon is ignorant of the way in which his icon treats him and his fellow-jurymen.

Cleon is also subtly attacked in the domestic trial scene, set up to ease Philocleon's withdrawal symptoms, where the dog Labes is prosecuted for stealing a cheese. The scene as a whole satirises Cleon's contemporary prosecution of Laches, who supposedly embezzled money from his campaigns in Sicily. The prosecuting dog, Kuon, evokes Cleon, who was nicknamed 'the hound of Cydathenaeum,' and 'the noisy barker.' Thus

Aristophanes is able to use the medium of entertainment to show his Athenian audience some of the serious political issues affecting the city.

The importance of power is also shown in Philocleon's belief that he is a powerful figure. He refers to 'great hulking figures' who 'crawled to me and tried to soften me up'; he even compares himself to thundering Zeus. The source of his power, he claims, lies in his role as a juror, because he has the power to sentence other men. His addiction is more to meting out punishment than to dispensing justice – perhaps a fault in the system, which Aristophanes is trying to highlight. The representation of the poor jurors (the chorus) as wasps, using their power to sting their victims, is a striking piece of symbolism. In a marvellous example of law-court rhetoric, though, Bdelycleon sets out to prove just how little power Philocleon really wields. Audiences enjoyed the cut-and-thrust of courtroom oratory – but with the entertainment, as ever, Aristophanes combines a serious political point.

## Don't mock the afflicted

It is clear, however, that, as much as he mocks them, Aristophanes is sympathetic towards the weak and manipulated jurors. In the parabasis, he allows them to proclaim their role in the Persian Wars: 'twas we who served the city best.' Although they are at times portrayed, with comic exaggeration, as curmudgeonly and ferocious, they deserve the gratitude and support of the younger generation for their contribution towards making the Athenian Empire great. Aristophanes contrasts the glorious past with the sad state of affairs in contemporary Athens. Similarly, Philocleon is treated with as much sympathy as disdain. The audience hears much about Philocleon before he comes onstage, and expects some kind of monster to appear. When he does eventually appear, however, he comes across as a disempowered old man, imprisoned in his own house by his slaves.

It is the politicians who hold the real power. In addressing his father, Bdelycleon refers to the ordinary people as 'slaves,' and emphasises the way that politicians manipulate them as regards the distribution of wealth from the Athenian empire. Though he exaggerates and oversimplifies the complex structures of fifth-century democracy, he does expose a weakness in the system by asking 'Where does all the money go?' The question is directed at Philocleon, but it is a question that Aristophanes also wants his audience to think about. The list of perks enjoyed by the politicians is presented as a climactic list: 'pickle and wine ... fancy cloaks and coronets ... every conceivable luxury.'

Through the medium of comedy, Aristophanes makes his audience think about who they really are, and whether they deserve their reputation and power. Are they being misled by cynical demagogues who manipulate institutions for their own profit? Aristophanes presents to the people a cure that is analogous to Bdelycleon's cure of his father at the end of the play: both seem to strip away the apparent justice of the politicians' treatment of the people, and expose the harsh realities of the situation. While it would be wrong to claim that Aristophanes had any one single purpose in writing the *Wasps*, he certainly engaged with 'serious' issues of contemporary politics.

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<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristophanes/wasps.html>